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The ROCK OF THE MARNE

A Chronological Story of the 38th Regiment, U. S. Infantry

By
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Captain, 38th U. S. Infantry
Commanding G Company

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GENERAL U. G. McALEXANDER
"THE ROCK OF THE MARNE"

THE ROCK OF THE MARNE

A Chronological Story of the 38th Regiment, United States Infantry

This story was begun while Captain Wooldridge was lying wounded in Colonel McAlexander's Headquarters on the Vesle River, August 2-10, 1918.—EDITOR.

WHEN two Divisions of German shock troops pile up on a regiment of American fighting men, one does not need to be gifted in imagination to see war in all its ramifications and vicissitudes.

I admit that to those of us who participated the picture as a whole is blurred by proximity while spots are multicolored and accentuated into sheets of concentrated lightning.

The historian of the future will view the battle from afar and do much better, particularly as he will not be hampered by individual facts. Therefore we shall tell you the story and not the history of the 38th's recent unpleasantness.

The scene is laid in that erstwhile heavenly little valley of the Surmelin which finds its resting place on the banks of the River Marne. The semi-mountainous ridges that flank this little valley are wooded with what the French call trees; they are tangled with shrubs and second growths that make for ideal machine gun nests.

Down in the bosom of the valley meanders the Surmelin river, so called we presume because the French do not know our word "crick." It is a heavily foliaged creek; its value we first recognized in its production of trout through the agency of the festive "OF" grenade tossed into its tiny pools.

This valley is a series of golden wheat fields and garden patches. Not fields as you know them but as the

French crofter laboriously cultivates by hand to the limits of one man's activities—small, though profuse, spots of shining cereal decorated resplendently with carmine red poppies.

The maps show this valley to be the gateway to Paris—that is, from the farthest point of the second German drive to the Marne. Would you call it the 38th's good fortune to be given this gateway to defend? Anyway, the fates so decreed and we were rushed by the fastest means possible from our training billets, with French beds five feet high, at Arc, Cour le Vecque, and Couprey, to stem the tide and thereby block the way to Paris.

The 38th had made some marches before and has since, but none of us will forget when we pulled into the woods back of St. Eugene that last day of our trek. We had revised the tables of field equipment on the way so that when we got there we didn't bother to spread our blankets. We simply laid down and hoped in a maudlin, disconnected way one of the shells the Germans welcomed us with would make a direct hit and end it all.

The Colonel was right there ahead of us. Nobody ever knows how he does it but he is always ahead of us and we have gotten used to a confident feeling of knowing it's all right to go anywhere because the Colonel is ahead. He warned us about aeroplane observation and gas shells and said, "Be ready for orders to move up!"

We try to think back now to the days when we were innocent of high explosives, gas, and aerial bombs. It seems like robbing the catacombs to bring up the dim pasts of two months ago. We have lived many lifetimes and have seen, in those two months, many pass to that bourne from whence no traveler returns.

Our position was taken without delay on the south bank of the Marne, which is about fifty yards wide and which at that time separated us from the enemy. The Colonel gave orders directly opposite to the "Live and Let Live" principle. "Don't let anything alive show itself on the other side except those you go over and get for information!"

With the French opposite them the Germans have an insulting and cocky way of strolling about their business in plain view at a few hundred yards. The French custom of running themselves ragged trying to hit the enemy with a hand grenade did not appeal to us, so we became, in the German opinion, disgustingly belligerent with our rifles.

Their movements soon after our advent became surreptitious and reptilian. So at night we paddled over in various nondescript flotillas, dug them out of their holes or chased their patrols around a bit—and sometimes got chased back again somewhat the worse for wear. They sprinkled us with H. E.'s and gas and we likewise sprinkled them. It was a great game and we thrived on it.

One dark night a patrol of theirs came over right at the point of a sentry post of ours. As they reached for the bank with a boat hook a Yank accommodatingly took hold and pulled them in. He said, "Come on over, Fritz. We are waiting for you," and our men proceeded to pacify one boat load of misdirected Huns.

That sort of thing was our daily, or rather nightly, ration, until prisoners and intelligence officers began to tell a new story. The Boche were preparing for another grand offensive and this time their objective was Paris with no stops.

The Kaiser issued a manifesto: "I will be in Paris by midnight of July 17, 1918." In fact, he had arranged a supper party there and the stage was being set.

Diplomacy is the gentle art of telling something which is not exactly true to somebody who does not exactly believe it. Diplomacy was invented to camouflage language. At any rate, we suspect the Kaiser of using diplomacy with his troops for once and painting a beautiful word picture of himself, and Gott, and Von Hindenburg, and Ludendorf, not to mention probably the Caliph of Bagdad or his friend the Punjab of Teheran, sitting at a marble top slab on the public balcony in

Paris, wrapping themselves around the foaming seidel and fragrant liverwurst.

With this thing of beauty in their minds his soldiers began to stack up "drive impedimenta." Lieutenant Murray secured voluminous reports on enemy activity. We captured an artillery captain and he affirmed it. At night we would hear "preparation sounds" on the other side that fascinated us.

The French on our right were generous with their warnings and made feverish arrangements for something or other—we thought at the time it was for battle. Aeroplanes and scouts verified this rumor and it looked like business. So the whole thing so far as our sector was concerned—the Gateway to Paris, the Valley of the Surmelin—was put up to the Colonel, U. G. McAlexander, who at once proceeded to make hay while the making was good.

"Rowe, you hold the front line with two companies of your battalion, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, with two companies in their immediate support," answered Major Rowe, commander of the 2nd Battalion.

"Very well," said the Colonel. "Thicken the lines by moving one company up. This will give you three company fronts on our sector and your remaining company will entrench themselves in echelon formation, so," indicating on map with pencil marks the exact position he wished them in. "They will act in close support on the extreme right and also as a right flank guard. The weak point on this line is on our right. I don't believe the French will be able to hold and I shall arrange my regiment to meet that contingency."

This was a direct statement as usual; no equivocation in the Colonel's remarks. But we were all greatly surprised, as everybody else had complete confidence in the gallantry of the French Division on our right. It was our first introduction to the depth of the man in his preparation for battle. But for his judgment on

their inability to hold this would be a requiem, not a story.

The regiment was arranged on advanced and original principles of "formation in depth." The 2nd Battalion, Major Rowe, as above; then the 1st Battalion, Major Keeley, and the 3rd, Major Lough. The Colonel looked us over individually and collectively, took a rifle to a point near the river in broad daylight, sniped a while as though to challenge the enemy, and said, "Let 'em come."

The evening of July 14th came with a darkness you could feel. French crickets cricked in a language we could not understand. Night birds winged their uncertain way in pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. Frogs croaked and walked—not hopped—after the manner of no other frogs on earth. The Y. M. C. A.—God bless them!—sent chocolates and cigarettes down to the men in the very front lines. The rolling kitchens steamed up in preparation of the boys' one hot meal per day to be delivered by carrying parties to the front. Company commanders made the usual night reconnaissance of their positions, chatted with the Lieutenants and again learned that a plebiscite of the men would produce a reiteration of the Colonel's "Let 'em come."

Our artillery lugged over the usual intermittent harassing fire, but the murmuring pines and whispering hemlocks went A. W. O. L. so far as looking out for the Germans was concerned. For all the noise they made you could hear your eyelashes meet. Their quiet finally became ominous and there was a general stiffening of our cerebral vertebra.

At exactly 12 o'clock it happened.

All the demons of hell and its ally, Germany, were unleashed in a fierce uproar that transcended all bombardments of the past. It thundered and rained shells, H. E.'s, shrapnel and gas. They swept our sector as with a giant scythe, and as far back as their guns would reach.

For hours that seemed weeks we huddled in our tiny splinter proofs or open slit trenches in the horrible confusion of it all, but we lovingly patted our, as yet, cold steel and awaited the second shock we knew would come—the shock of bodies, material bodies that we could see, feel and fight—something tangible, so that we could release our mad lust to kill this great snake that was slowly coiling around us, this furious beast that was volcanically tearing at our vitals.

God, what hallucinations under a pounding like that!

Yes, we wanted them to come. We wanted anything to come that we could see, feel, and fight. We wanted to fight, I tell you! Not to lie there on the rocking ground with hell crashing and the devils snatching at our guts, our eyes, our lungs.

What was that in our lungs?

Yes, damn them, Gas!

They are not satisfied to drench us at long distances with all the steel they can crowd into space but the dirty, ghoulish, primeval Hun, racks his warped and tortured brain for a method more becoming the slime and filth of his rotten being.

Well, so be it. We fight him back with his weapons, so on with the gas masks, it's only a bluff. He can't come himself in his poison—and he's coming, he's coming!

It became a song in our hearts—"He's Coming! He's Coming!"

We began to brighten perceptibly. Instead of the earth rocking it became the gentle tossing of a languorous, moonlit sea. We leaned our heads in genuine affection against the dirt sides of our little slit trench and began to marvel at its motherly shelter. How they could churn up the whole world and never drop one in! Of course they could not drop one in. They had no brain, the swine.

If a chemist could run them through a Pasteur filter, he would get a trace of intellectual process about the mental grade of the Pithecanthropus erectus!

That's it. He is shooting away his fireworks in the vain hope of something. Wonder what it is! Anyway, he shot it away for eight hours on our support and reserve lines, but at about 4 o'clock on the morning of the 15th he lifted his general bombardment on the front line and started a rolling barrage, one hundred meters in three minutes.

Behind it, almost hugging it, they came!

God, weren't we glad to see the grayness of them!

This was more like. Something we could see, feel and fight. And when we say they came we mean two divisions of them.

"When two divisions of German shock troops pile up on a regiment of American fighting men"—Do you remember what we told you!

Well! they piled up, at first with excellent formation and a distribution of machine guns, as bumble bees distribute themselves after the small boy wallops their nest with his handful of switches—all over everywhere.

On the river bank where they came in crowds, boats, and pontoon bridges, it was eye to eye, tooth to tooth, and hand to hand. It was a strange silence after the barrage had passed. The tack-tack-tack of machine guns, mounted and firing from boats as they came, and the clash of steel as the bayonets met sounded like a death stillness compared to it.

The lines on the river were fought out completely. The barrage had not reached the railway bank and reenforcements could not be sent to them. They paid the supreme price but the action delayed the enemy advance so that the organizations in depth could unlimber and meet the advance with the result as stated above—this is a story, not a requiem.

Their barrage got away from them, an unpardonable crime in military science but humanly pardonable when one learns they thought it impossible to be met and fought on the river bank.

Our line of resistance was the Metz-Paris Railway. The embankment is some nine feet high with tiny slit

trenches on the forward edge but not sufficiently forward to be on the military crest. When the Boche started their advance across the wheat fields intervening, some five hundred yards, this embankment became a living thing and American Springfields began to laugh in their faces.

That wasn't fair. They had been assured with all German sangfroid that there would be no resistance after their barrage. But those were shock troops brought from afar with orders. "To Paris. No Stop-overs."

Though their brains became loose-leaf ledgers with no index and the Kaiser became a more ghostly figure, they were fighters. I should say, professional soldiers. So they came on. We admit they looked like the whole German army and we had to wonder if the little old Springfield would keep on laughing. We had been warned of a big offensive, but we did not know the Boche thought our front was like a city park, free for all.

The Springfield did keep on laughing and after covering about half the distance they were transformed from a soldiers' maneuver column into a German military omelet. However, their machine guns had infiltrated through the high wheat and covered our front as flies cover spilled molasses.

The rest hit the ground and continued their advance in a more becoming manner, like a mole. They wriggled themselves, many of them to the very foot of the railway embankment, where they were safe from our fire for the above mentioned reason. They rested, then charged the crest, were hurled back; rested, threw stick grenades and charged some more, but never successfully, until the splendid heroes of that line joined their comrades of the river bank, joined them on that long journey to a land which knows no war.

Then came the supporting troops from their immediate rear in a charge to which history will never do justice. They couldn't come before, as there is only

room for a certain number to fight on the forward edge. To the Germans on the embankment the Kaiser must have taken on a more material aspect; they saw visions of Paris, but visions only, which disappeared like mist in the sunshine.

It was not sunshine that hit them. No. It was an earthquake. San Francisco one April morning of 1906 had nothing on that shock which must have been felt back in the Reichstag. Bayonets, rifle butts, fists and teeth. Our boys in khaki were overwhelmed by numbers in gray.

But the McAlexander spirit; that is God-given and Heaven-sent!

The Colonel had said, "Let 'em come." Well, here they are, and God, the joy of it all!

Did you ever turn yourself loose in a mad passion that knew no limit? Were you ever blinded by blood and lust to kill and let yourself go in a crowd where you could feel their bodies crumble and sink to the depths below you, then brace yourself on them, and destroy, destroy, destroy?

I hope not, but we did—and what do numbers amount to against spirit? In San Francisco the earthquake subsided and we were left to contemplate and ponder. There was no subsiding of these seismic demons of Col. Ulysses Grant McAlexander, once they had their orders. We were to hold that rail road. Did we hold it? Go down there and count the German graves. Six hundred before G Company alone. Ask the prisoners, pens of them, why they didn't fulfill their mission. They don't know just what happened, but whatever it was, it was awful, colossal.

Sir, they did not even take the first line of resistance of the 38th. An officer, later captured, stated that only twelve of the 6th Grenadiers, the Kaiser's favorite Prussian shock troops, returned to their side of the Marne.

Yes, back they went, and they stood not upon the manner of their going, although I will say their ma-

chine guns covered their retreat to the limit of their ability. Without their usual "nest" arrangement they were comparatively easy picking for us. For instance, during the retreat Corporal Newell with his squad augmented by two men went down into the field and captured five guns, killing or capturing their crews.

During the heat of battle one lone private (Bishop) crawled down the embankment through the wheat to the flank of a machine gun crew who were too busy on their front to know where his shots were coming from. He picked off seven Germans and dragged the gun back with him. Private Richardson, whose sobriquet was Eaglebeak—he looked so much like his illustrious origin of the funny pictures—he was so thin that only a great emergency made his uniform possible, joined in an attack upon a particularly troublesome machine gun. As we crossed bayonets his rifle was knocked from his hands. Undaunted, he threw himself upon the machine gunner, who was firing with his pistol, took it from him and killed him with it. Private Wilson, also losing his piece for the moment, met a charge with his bare fists flattening two of the enemy, regained his rifle and held his position.

Corporal Salner continued firing from a prone position after part of his stomach had been shot away by five bullets. He saved our front line left flank by lustily shouting a warning against a machine gun being set up directly on our line.

Water-cart drivers, mess sergeants and cooks, joined their fighting units. The mess sergeant of Reid's Company, after having both legs broken by small arms fire, made his men carry him to a new position where he continued operating a Chauchat automatic rifle until killed.

Another mess sergeant crawled down into the field to rescue a comrade. Before starting he said, "I don't suppose I'll make it in the face of this fire, but I'll try it for a Buddy." He was badly wounded.

My water-cart driver, the littlest chap in the U. S.

Army, killed a husky Prussian officer with a bayonet. These incidents are not typical, they are extraordinary, but they serve to illustrate the many, many remarkable individual feats of heroism of the 38th, under the stress of battle.

No grander man lived than Lieut. Kenneth P. Murray, killed in a flank attack which started in a line from the railway to the church in Mezy, drove in one hundred and eighty-five prisoners, but from which only three returned, the company commander (my humble self) and two privates. Lieut. Mercer M. Phillips died on the railway with a blood dripping bayonet on the rifle in his hands. Lieut. David C. Calkins, whose troops blocked the enemy's progress at the river edge until the barrage passed and those in his support could get into action, was badly wounded and made prisoner.

Many, many, other splendid souls, born leaders of brave men, joined the great majority with a smile on their lips and pistols empty.

Lieut. Colonel Frank H. Adams, that great soldier with a lion's heart, and yet who led his command by an irresistible personal magnetism, by precept and example and never an unkind word—that big, handsome, he-fighter won the Distinguished Service Cross by standing in the way of a whole battalion, not one that he had any direct connection with, but one nearby that was practically routed by the shock the 38th stood and fought back. He brought comparative order out of chaos and succeeded in getting them into a support position.

We could mention hundreds of great deeds by great men on that day, but this is a story of the 38th, not of the indomitable spirits that go to make it up, or we would never reach the end.

At 10 o'clock, on the 15th, our front was fairly cleared and we were beginning to feel that it was a great day, when something else happened. Can you, who were not with us, imagine how a prohibitionist

feels on a yachting party? Completely surrounded by hell and damnation and can't get off.

The enemy had penetrated to our left like the boll weevil through a Southerner's cotton patch and fortified himself with minenwurffers, machine guns and barbed wire. They did not penetrate to our right. No, they simply walked over and wondered how much of a hike it was to Paris. We were then aware of the reason for "Feverish preparations on the part of the French on our right."

Do you remember what we told you? We thought it was to fight, but evidently no such idea ever marred the sweet thoughts of the 131st. Say what you please, make any defense you like. They weren't there. And that's the business we have in hand just now. They weren't there. Whence they came or whither they went we know not. A. W. O. L. most likely, but that is neither here nor there.

On the morning of July 15, 1918, when Col. McAlexander was hurling battalion after battalion of the 38th into the Surmelin valley, the Gateway to Paris, and outfighting, out-maneuvering, out-generaling the Kaiser's favorites, there were no friendly troops on our right where they had been on the evening of the 14th.

However, thank God for a real soldier's instinct. The Colonel had anticipated and was prepared to meet a right flank attack. Good old Captain Reid was there to meet them when they tried to consolidate their line through our regiment. He met them first with rifle fire, then with the bayonet, and finally wtih butts. He fought them all over the ridge and down on every side except our side. He never let them set foot on our sector of the Marne and though it cost him nearly his entire command he was there when fresher troops could get to him for relief.

On the left we repulsed a heavy rear attack and a light flank attack with a handful of the most exhausted troops in France—old "G" Company reduced to fifty-two men from two hundred and fifty-one—taking up

new positions and fighting off ten to one is a picture that will ever live in the memory of the 38th.

Major Rowe made desperate efforts to reinforce, but the Boche, just at that place, had us under direct fire of Austrian 88's, German 77's, and one pounders. You know what direct fire means. Effective forces can't be sent against it, that's all.

So, for three days we fought on our flanks, for three days the German high command gave us all they had in their desperation to open the gateway. The Colonel received an order. "Fall back if you think best."

He answered, "Is it up to my decision?"

The answer: "Yes."

The Colonel's answer: "Then I hold my lines!"

God, what a world of torture and yet solace in that answer! What a world of pain and joy! We were shot to ribbons, cut to small sections, unfed, and oh, so tired; but the drive would never have stopped once they consolidated their lines through the 38th.

It was Paris for them and a terrible defeat for us if we withdrew and gave them the little Surmelin valley. The Colonel had been studying the attack orders taken from captured German officers and knew as no one else knew what it meant to fall back.

He was there for a soldier's purpose and did a soldier's duty. He paid an awful price, made sacrifices of officers and men that tore his heart to pieces. But he held the Gateway to Paris and not only that, drove them back across the Marne and FOLLOWED THEM ACROSS.

Believe it or not, it was an absolute physical impossibility, but we went right on after them and fought them again at Jaulgonne—still nobody on our right, mind you—where for several days and several nights it steadily rained and where for the same length of time we hammered them with shot and bayonet until they fell back with such impetus that our next big battle was at Fismes on the River Vesle.

One soldier was heard to remark: "I don't see any

more prisoners coming in. I wonder what can be the matter?"

Second soldier: "Didn't you hear the Colonel say he had all the information he needed?"

There are not many of us left of the old 38th. There has been considerable talk in French circles about "Regiment d'elite," "unconquerable tenacity," and the like. Yes, our flag is to be decorated with the Croix de Guerre and it is generally recognized in high French command that "McAlexander's defense was peculiarly American in conception, plan and execution." You see we have been under French command and our deeds have not been recounted at home. All the glory goes to the High Command.

Things like this though, we keep close to our hearts

27 July, 1918.

General Order 1

((From the Field.)

To the Officers and Men of the 38th U. S. Infantry:

The Colonel commanding the regiment wishes to praise you for the heroic manner in which you took your baptism of fire on July 15, 1918, upon the banks of the Marne. No regiment in the history of our nation has ever shown a finer spirit or performed a greater deed.

Let us cherish within our hearts the memory of our fallen comrades. Salute them! Then FORWARD!

McAlexander.

And look at this for an official report and try to remember if in all history such a feat was ever before accomplished:

Headquarters, 38th U. S. Infantry,
A. P. O. 740, France, 8 August, 1918.

From: Commanding Officer, 38th U. S. Infantry.

To: The Adjutant General, U. S. Army.
(Through Military Channels.)

Subject: Capture of Prisoners from Three German Divisions.

1. In the second battle of the Marne, July 15-23, 1918, the 38th U. S. Infantry was attacked on the south bank of the Marne, July 15-18, by two German divisions, and it captured prisoners from each of their regiments, namely:

10th Division
- 6th Grenadiers Guards
- 47th Infantry
- 398th Infantry

36th Division
- 5th Grenadier Guards
- 128th Infantry
- 175th Infantry

2. On July 22, 1918, this regiment attacked the 10th Division Landwehr on the north bank of the Marne and captured prisoners from its three regiments namely:

10th Division
Landwehr
- 372nd Infantry
- 377th Infantry
- 378th Infantry

3. It is believed that the capture of prisoners from nine enemy regiments during nine days of battle constitutes a record justifying a report to the War Department.

4. Identification of twenty-one separate and distinct regimental and other units were secured from enemy positions in front of this regiment.

U. G. McAlexander,
Colonel, 38th U. S. Infantry.

Col. Robert H. Kelton, Chief of Staff, made the most fitting remark of all. With his arm around the sturdy shoulders of Col. McAlexander, he said to Major General Dickman, Commander of the 3rd Division:

"General, this is The Rock of the Marne."

Extracts from address of Hon. C. N. McArthur of Oregon, in Congress, May 1, 1920:

"It was at the Marne in September, 1914, that the French under Joffre turned back the German hordes in their mad dash toward Paris; and it was at the Marne in July, 1918, on the selfsame ground that a single regiment of American infantrymen, with some aid from the artillery, once more stemmed the German tide and rolled it back in defeat, earning thereby for itself and its gallant colonel the proud title, 'The Rock of the Marne.'

* * * * * * * *

"World military annals report few feats that equal, and none that surpass, the deeds of the Thirty-eighth Regiment of Infantry under the command of Col. Ulysses Grant McAlexander in the Second Battle of the Marne. 'On this occasion,' says Commander in Chief John J. Pershing in his final report, 'a single regiment of the Third Division wrote one of the most brilliant pages in our military annals. It prevented the crossing at certain points on its front, while on either flank the Germans who had gained a footing pressed forward. Our men, firing in three directions, met the German attacks with counterattacks at critical points and succeeded in throwing two German divisions into complete confusion, capturing 600 prisoners.'

* * * * * * * *

"Need our schoolboys turn to Leonidas at Thermopylae or Miltiades at Marathon for tales of heroism after such a recital as this? Surely the story of McAlexander and the Thirty-eighth at the Marne will find its place in our histories alongside that of Jackson at New Orleans and Thomas, the 'Rock of Chickamauga.'"

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